

BCIM Corridor:

A Path to Regional Integration



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Abstract

This research paper tries to explore the challenges & Opportunities of the BCIM corridor. Competitive geo-political goals between the two large partners – India and China – is undermining the geo-economic opportunities likely to arise from sub-regional cooperation among the BCIM countries. However, neither India nor China could reach the growth climax without the help of each other. As a result, India and China need not fear each other, as it is not “India or China but India and China” which would redefine the global economy. The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) is a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing economic cooperation and connectivity among the four countries involved. The corridor seeks to facilitate trade and investment by improving infrastructure, such as roads, railways, and ports, thereby fostering regional integration and economic growth. The BCIM-EC is a sub-regional cooperative program that aims to connect southwest China's land-locked regions with eastern India and the Bay of Bengal via northern Myanmar, the northeastern region of India, and Bangladesh. It holds the potential to address regional disparities, particularly in the underdeveloped areas of northeastern India and Myanmar, while promoting sustainable development and cultural exchanges among member nations. Because of the geo-strategic and geo-economic significance of physical connectivity in the BCIM sub-region, the study tends to highlight areas of mutual benefit of the BCIM nations by and large.

Introduction

Today, Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor has to be placed for the prosperity of South Asia. It is a result of the great past of trade routes. But China's engagement with South Asia through the "BCIM" Initiative has become a part of the concern for India. A total of 440 million people are expected to live along the 1.65 million square kilometer corridor that would connect Northern India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China's Yunnan Province.

As the communication between Yunnan and India began to strengthen in the 1990s, Sino-Indian ties were improved. Yunnan scholars were invited to participate in the "International Conference of Regional Economic Development of India and China" and the "International Symposium on India-China Economic Reform" for three years in a row, from 1997 to 1999, by the University of Calcutta in India and the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) in New Delhi (Kondapalli, 2017). Following rounds of talks, all parties concluded that a seminar on Yunnan-India economic cooperation was required. Because of Myanmar's and Bangladesh's distinct positions and responsibilities in the area. Yunnan academia advocated inviting representatives from both countries to attend the conference. Finally, the seminar was dubbed the "International Conference on Economic Cooperation and Development between China, India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh" (Kondapalli, 2017). The inaugural conference was conducted in Kunming in 1999 popularly known as the Kunming Initiative.

BCIM EC refers to the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, an initiative this corridor seeks to promote trade, investment, and infrastructure development among member countries.. Its significance includes:

1. **Regional Connectivity**: The corridor aims to improve infrastructure and transportation links, facilitating trade and movement of goods across borders.
2. **Economic Benefits**: - Trade Expansion: Increased trade opportunities among the four countries, potentially leading to higher exports and imports..
3. **Strategic Partnerships**: The BCIM-EC can strengthen strategic partnerships among the member countries, allowing them to collaborate on various issues, including security, trade, and regional stability.
4. **Investment Opportunities**: The initiative is likely to attract foreign investment, particularly in infrastructure projects, benefiting local economies.
5. **Cultural Exchange**: Enhanced connectivity can promote cultural exchanges, fostering better understanding and collaboration among the populations of these countries.
6. **Balancing Influence**: It provides a platform for India and China to engage in regional development, balancing each other's influence in South Asia and Southeast Asia.
7. **Market Access**: For businesses in the member countries, the corridor can provide access to larger markets, enabling them to expand their reach and enhance competitiveness.
8. **Sustainable Development**: The corridor has the potential to promote sustainable development by encouraging investments in renewable energy, green technologies, and environmentally friendly infrastructure.

Overall, BCIM EC represents a significant step toward deeper economic integration and cooperation in the region.

After studying lot of paper & article I found some key features on the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) can encompass various dimensions, including its economic implications, geopolitical significance, infrastructure development, and social impacts. Below is a structured overview of key themes and findings from the existing literature:

1. Economic Integration and Trade Potential

Trade Facilitation: Several studies highlight the potential for enhanced trade among the BCIM countries. Research indicates that reduced tariffs and improved logistics can significantly increase trade volumes.

2. Infrastructure Development

Connectivity Improvements: Many articles focus on the need for infrastructure development, such as roads, railways, and ports. Authors argue that improved connectivity can reduce travel time and costs, facilitating smoother trade routes.

3. Geopolitical Context

Strategic Alliances: The BCIM-EC is often analyzed within the context of regional geopolitics. Scholars discuss how it serves as a counterbalance to other initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the implications for India's foreign policy.

Security Concerns: Literature also addresses security issues, including border disputes and regional stability, emphasizing the need for cooperative security frameworks among the member countries.

4. Social and Cultural Dimensions

Cultural Exchange: Some studies highlight the potential for cultural exchanges and improved people-to-people connections, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among diverse communities.

Social Impact: Researchers examine the potential social implications, including displacement due to infrastructure projects and the need for inclusive development strategies.

5. Challenges and Criticisms

Implementation Hurdles: I identifies many various challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, political instability, and differences in regulatory frameworks among the countries involved.

Many observers in South Asia see the BCIM initiative as “an emerging opportunity” that could be a “game changer” for the region. Such assessments are clearly driven by the prospects of economic benefits at a time when bilateral trade in the BCIM countries are growing rapidly in recent years. However, there are other issues and challenges that are still at play when the initiative is seen from the political prism.

Some issues have been inherent in the BCIM initiative since the beginning. Government involvement in the BCIM initiative has been not different in terms of both the attitude and level of participation. Since the beginning the BCIM was a Track I activity for China and Myanmar with the Burmese central government on the one hand and the Yunnan Provincial government taking the lead role. For India and Bangladesh, the BCIM began as a Track II initiative and soon Dhaka decided to move towards Track I. The BCIM remained largely a Track II activity as far as New Delhi was concerned until the India-China Joint Statement of May 2013 when the BCIM was officially endorsed at the highest level, thus moving towards Track I venture. An extension of this issue has also been reflected in the level of involvement and role of government. For instance, Yunnan province of China has played a leadership role in the BCIM discussions but this has not be the case the states from eastern India.^{<14>} While some of these issues continue to create challenges, new dilemmas and questions are also emerging on how to take the BCIM initiative forward.

First, there are two views emerging on the approach itself – one group arguing for an economic-centric approach and the other for a “more people-centric, inclusive approach mindful of local social realities. The other dilemma is the tension between centralisation and decentralisation.

This corridor seems highly possible to mainly serve China's interests by boosting economic output and prosperity in China's Yunnan and neighbouring provinces. It will help to move Chinese goods to the Indian market overland without trying to cross the disputed region. It would also provide China with clear and unrestricted access to the Bay of Bengal, facilitating it to lower its reliance for international trade and energy imports on the narrow and riskprone Malacca Straits. On the other hand, there'll be minimal benefits for India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The corridor will strategically bring China within the sniffing distance of Arunachal Pradesh, all of whose 93,000 square kilometres it claims as Southern Tibet. It really would pose a strategic risk for India to allow China access to this region before the border issue is settled in a friendly manner, the responsibility for which largely rests with China. Given China's greater strategic and economic power, the EC is likely to bring India's northeastern states under China's growing influence, further weakening its physical, economic, social, and emotional chord with India's mainland. It is time for India to strengthen Northeast connectivity and integration with its continent. Already some steps have been taken. However much more needs to be done. The EC as currently formulated will only touch on two of the seven states-Assam and Manipur-out in northeastern India. The other five states, however small they may be, will remain untouched by its impact. In insurgencies, ethnic disturbances, drug and human trafficking and gun-running, the entire region comprising India's northeast and areas across its borders with neighbouring countries are embroiled. Under the prevailing circumstances, the construction of various BCIM-EC segments will have difficulty providing security, peace, and security.

India's top concern is to develop and improve infrastructure including highways, rail, waterways, and air connectivity throughout north-eastern states, both in the area and with the rest of the nation. Strategically important, these states are richly endowed with natural resources such as uranium, coal, hydrocarbons, forests, oil and gas. In January 2014, during Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit as chief guest at India's Republic Day, India invited Japan to invest in and develop infrastructure in the country.

In addition, India has placed great emphasis on implementing its Act East Policy to promote connectivity across Myanmar between the north-eastern states and ASEAN countries. India has achieved considerable success in the fight against insurgencies in the north-eastern states, with the active cooperation of Bangladesh and Myanmar.¹⁶ The resulting peace dividend needs to be translated to development, through investment in green and clean industries, agriculture, tourism, handicraft manufacturing. The Modi government's passive attitude towards building the BCIM-EC can be explained by the security dilemma theory by which "states assume the worst of each other's intentions" under anarchy, and thus tend to maximize their own safety preparation as a defensive posture, which in turn triggers similar movements from potential rivals

The relationship between India and China has been marked by continued strategic mistrust, as there have been many unresolved issues since the 1950s, including mainly border conflicts, the issues of Tibet and the Dalai Lama, the Pakistan factor, India's fear of China's "Pearl String" strategy, and China's anxiety about possible US encirclement through deepening strategic links.

Under its Look East/Act East rubric, India has been fostering sub-regional coordination via connectivity programs such as the 'Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC),' the 'Trilateral Highway Project,' and the multi-modal Kaladan project to protect its place in the BCIM sub-region. The heavy presence of China in the region, either through the BCIM-EC or through bilateral cooperation with regional countries, sounds, of course, troubles India.

A relatively new topic worth elaborating on is China's "String of Pearls" strategy, a term designed to characterize China's increasing bilateral trade, investment and development-oriented infrastructure projects in India's neighbourhood (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar), that most Indian scholars see this as a serious "Major Challenges and Remedies in Building the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor" obstacle to India's economic interests in the region. Within India's military and security circles, there is also widespread apprehension that such infrastructure spending may be used for military purposes to extend China's presence in the Indian Ocean Region. In addition to major-power competition issues, India is concerned about the BCIM-EC because it could trigger mass movements of certain ethnic groups in northeast India, where the BCIM-EC passes, for self-determination or even independence.

Conclusion

The discussion indicates that there are different political and security concerns at the local, national, regional level that really need to be resolved before addressing the BCIM-EC's commercial possibilities. Trade networks, transit services, infrastructure capacities are all relevant, but in the wider societal sense, these operational dimensions of the economic corridor need to be addressed. The BCIM requires being an organization that builds trust not only within BCIM but rather with external players and groupings and keeps it inclusive for everyone. It must be recognized that we are talking about a zone of conflict. Therefore a careful approach to conflicts is important. The implementation of a responsive approach with the aim of sustainable development will become the basis of BCIM projects. The development of a multimodal transportation system that links road-rail-sea transport for seamless movement should be given proper attention to the integrated transport system. The trouble-free movement of goods across borders is one of the main prerequisites of effective regional cooperation. The removal of all nontariff barriers to trade can ensure this. BCIM initiative should focus primarily on developing the growth zone, and is also helpful to make good strategic relationship within all State.

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